DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 038 629 AL 002 372

AUTHOR Allen, Virginia F.
TITLE Reading the Language of Public Life.
PUB DATE Mar 70
NOTE 7p.; Paper given at the fourth annual TESOL Convention, San Francisco, California, March 18-21, 1970

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.45
DESCRIPTORS Negro Students, *Reading Difficulty, *Reading Instruction, Standard Spoken Usage, *Teaching Techniques, *Tenl, Writing Exercises, Written Language

ABSTRACT

In this discussion of the reading problems of American Negro dialect speakers at intermediate grade level, the author uses the term "Public Language," because although it is not ideally satisfactory, it is free from the evaluative connotations of "Standard" English and directs attention away from distinctions of race or social class. Since the "Second Dialect" student's everyday speech is further removed than other dialects from the language of public life, his reading problems may best be solved by classroom activities that focus his attention on features that characterize the kind of English customarily presented to the public eye. The teacher should ask to what extent the student has (1) grasped the relationship between speech and writing in English, (2) developed decoding skills that enable him to recognize known words when he sees them, (3) adjusted to the many instances of mismatch between sounds and spelling, and (4) learned to compensate for the absence in print of aids to comprehension which are supplied by the voice in speech. Such questions, with answers in terms of classroom activities (illustrated briefly in this paper), deserve special attention when teachers help students read the language of public life. (AMM)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Virginia F. Allen
Temple University

ED038629

READING THE LANGUAGE OF PUBLIC LIFE

The term Public Language is not ideally satisfactory, but at least it is free from the evaluative connotations of "Standard" English. It directs attention away from distinctions of race or social class. Moreover, students find it a meaningful label for the set of grammatical conventions governing communications which are beamed at the general public, across ethnic and socio-cultural lines.

Specific features of this grammatical system can be observed and described in a wide range of obviously public contexts outside the schoolmarm's domain: in wedding announcements, obituaries, telephone directories, cookbooks and appliance manuals--as well as in school textbooks. Quite probably, throughout the lifetime of our current students, most features now characteristic of this grammatical system will survive -- features like the -s inflection for verbs with third-person singular subjects, for instance, and the occurrence of BE (vestigially, at least, as in I'm and They're) before the -ing form of a verb. Hence efficient reading of Public Language would seem to depend in part upon familiarity with that grammatical system, whether an individual chooses to use that system in his own speech or not.

When reading is a problem for intermediate grade students (or older ones) an obvious possible cause is the students' lack of experience in working from the known (their own language style) to the lesser-known (the written-down language of public life). One helpful way to deal with this cause of reading disability is to engineer a group-composition activity, starting with ideas expressed by the students in whatever way comes naturally. Once the points have been arrayed before the class on the chalkboard, they are then restyled by teacher and students collaboratively for the purpose of communicating to some segment of the public, and hence conforming to the conventions of public communication. Such an activity might go as follows:

TEACHER (at the chalkboard): Lincoln's Birthday is coming soon. Let's see what you remember about Abraham Lincoln. Who remembers one fact about him?

SANDRA: Like freeing the slaves? (Teacher writes: 1. Freeing slaves)

CLARICE: President of the United State. (T. writes: 2. Pres. of U.S.)

JAMES: He born in a log cabin. (T. writes: 3. Born in log cabin)

AL 002 372

After a few more contributions have been made, the teacher paves the way for rendering them into Public English by explaining: "The second graders are making some pictures for the display board in the hall. They need something about Lincoln for people to read along with the pictures. Now how can we put these facts you've mentioned into the right form for the display board?" Someone with clear handwriting is appointed to come to the chalkboard and write each sentence as soon as it has been composed by the class.

TEACHER: Our first sentence will probably start with Abraham Lincoln. What should the rest of the sentence be?

CLARICE: Abraham Lincoln was the President of the United State.

TEACHER: Say it slowly enough for Gloria to write it . . . What word comes after United, class?

CLASS: States.

TEACHER: What shall we do about fact #1 -- freeing the slaves?

JAMES: Abraham Lincoln was the President of the United States and he freed the slaves.

TEACHER: Can anybody find a way to use who instead of and in that sentence Gloria just wrote?

SANDRA: Abraham Lincoln was the President of the United States who freed the slaves. (Gloria writes the sentence.)

TEACHER: Read it to us, Dan, and let's see how it sounds.

In the same fashion, other sentences are proposed, recast in "public" form, and then read aloud. When the entire piece has been composed, copies are made by the class, and the neatest copy is selected for the display board. Such an activity -- a sort of elder brother to the Experience Chart -- builds bridges between the students' everyday dialect and the kind of English found in printed materials.

Undoubtedly some reading disability is caused by the reader's lack of familiarity with Standard English syntax and morphology. Some students might not understand the material even if they heard it instead of seeing it. Yet there is evidence to suggest that many Second Dialect students comprehend spoken Standard English so readily that they can translate heard sentences into their own dialect, with lightning speed. When thirteen-year old members of a street gang were

asked to repeat certain sentences after a Standard model, says Labov[1], "they failed because they perceived only the meaning and not the superficial form." For instance, when instructed to repeat "Nobody ever sat at any of those desks, anyhow," David said: "Nobody never sat in none o' tho' desses anyhow." Labov found that David was "typical of many speakers who do not perceive the surface details of the utterance so much as the underlying semantic structure, which they unhesitatingly translate into the vernacular form." Apparently, then, reading comprehension depends on more than familiarity with English syntactic and morphological features.

Roots of reading difficulty may extend as far back as the primary grades, when basic decoding skills were only haphazardly formed. If a student in any grade misreads material that he can understand in its oral form, the first thing to do is to find out how efficiently he can decode regularly spelled words. Nonsense words like the following would serve the purpose, printed on flash cards or on the chalkboard:

NUGG	FLENK	LOACHING
JEEB	HADGER	DAWP
KIPPY	TROON	MARPER

To spur effort and attention, this assessment of decoding skills can take place within the context of a story, with a title like SPACE WITCH, set in an alien world and developed orally by the teacher. At strategic points in the story (where the names of characters are introduced, for example, and where made-up names for objects and actions are encountered) the students decipher the printed words.

If this simple task proves at all difficult for any members of the class, the teacher's duty is clear: to give those students another chance to grasp the fundamental correspondences linking English sounds with the spelling patterns commonly used for representing them. Naturally, primary grade methods and materials designed for developing word-attack skills will not do for older students. In most cases the materials will need to be prepared by the teacher, moving from single words to simple sentences to brief paragraphs, all consisting mainly of regularly spelled words. (Irregularly spelled utility words like a, the, are and does should be introduced into the materials gradually, and identified as "non-conformists."

---

1 William Labov, "The Logic of Non-Standard English," in Alfred C. Aarons and others, eds., Linguistic-Cultural Differences and American Education, p. 70.

In addition to graded practice on materials designed to provide reliable bases for predicting how a given combination of letters will probably be pronounced, there is often a need for class discussion of the speech-writing relationship. Why does a certain chocolate manufacturer always print its name with an accent mark over the last e? Because otherwise people would pronounce it to rhyme with wrestle and trestle. Why? Because the combination -le is most commonly used to represent /əl/, not liy/. At the end of what other words do we find the combination -le? What is the most common spelling for the /æ/ sound? For the /ɛ/ sound? If we wanted to invent some names for new detergents and breakfast foods, some names people could easily pronounce just by looking at them in print, what might some names be?

It is good for students to become explicitly aware of the conventions that control ways in which spoken words are represented in print. It is good for their spelling, their writing, and their reading, to notice which words are spelled as one would expect, and which are not. It is particularly instructive to compare the spelled forms of common function words with the ways in which those words sound in casual speech. For example, how would the /ən/ in the following be written in conventional spelling (the spelling used for the language of public life)?

down /ən/ out
down /ən/ alley
down /ən/ the farm
down /ən/ a minute
down /ən/ you're ready

If a student understands spoken utterances but has trouble reading the same material from a printed page, his difficulty may well spring from the discrepancy between the sound and the look of words and syllables which are unstressed in the stream of speech. The expert reader has somehow adjusted to this unsatisfactory aspect of English writing. For instance, he has learned to live with the fact that /əz/ may turn up written is (Barnes /əz/ living) or has (Barnes /əz/ lived) or as (big /əz/ life) -- among other possibilities. The inexperienced reader may still be thrown off stride by words like is, as and has when he meets them in print -- not because the words themselves are unfamiliar, but because (in unstressed positions in sentences) they sound so different from the way they look.

We have noted that reading problems arise

-- when lack of acquaintance with Standard English would place even spoken Standard sentences beyond the student's grasp,

-- when lack of experience with the conventions of English writing prevent the student from recognizing even the words he actually knows.

Now to mention one more, which may prove an even more prevalent source of confusion and insecurity among poor readers. Often the student's reading disability stems from the fact that certain aids to comprehension which are provided by the voice in spoken sentences are not supplied at all in the writing system. Once in a classroom I saw the following sentence, written on the chalkboard:

Only by thinking do we make what we read our own.

Spoken aloud, this is not a very difficult sentence to understand. A speaker would call attention to thinking by saying it with extra volume and a rise in pitch. He would pause after thinking, to signal the end of a sentence sector. He would pause again after make (though the pause here would be briefer than the pause after thinking) and he would pronounce read and own quite loudly and deliberately. Through all these signals he would manage to convey the sense of a sentence which is far from easy to read -- because the written sentence provides none of the stress-pitch-juncture signals supplied by the speaker.

Whenever the sentences to be read are relatively long, this kind of difficulty may be found -- not, however, because length is in itself an obstacle to comprehension. Students themselves often write long sentences. Here is a fairly typical high school sentence:

The wind is blowing hard and you hear strange noises and it makes you scared but you don't want to show it because people will laugh so you kid around and say, "Who's scared?"

Most sentences found in textbooks and other Public Language media are actually shorter than this one. The difference is, of course, that professional writers avoid such obvious sector-markers as the ones this student has used: and, but, because and so, markers which cut the sentence into easily digestible chunks. Professional writers (i.e., those who write for the public) are more inclined to use imbedded constructions in their long sentences (clauses nested inside other clauses) and to depart from normal conversational word order for the sake of artistic effect, and to use participial constructions that look like predicate verbs but actually are not.

Such features of public prose would not trouble students unduly if the sentences could be heard, with the voice supplying cues by means of volume, pitch, etc.; but in print those signals are gone. What can be done to help students over this hurdle? First, students need a great deal of experience with listening to material read aloud by the teacher while following the printed version with their eyes. Second, students need to be spared the experience of reading

aloud unfamiliar passages of public prose -- and they particularly need to be saved from the damaging effects of hearing their classmates read aloud, since inexperienced readers almost inevitably distort the meaning of a sentence by mis-using stress, pitch and juncture. Think, for example, what a poor reader might do to the following bit of advice by Russell Conwell, founder of Temple University, if suddenly pounced upon and told to read it aloud:

"Do what you can with what you have where you are today."

Suppose the student reader intones it as follows:

Do what . . . you can with . . . what you . . . have
where . . . you . . . are today.

It takes an old hand at reading public prose to splice together those disjointed fragments, deliberately ignoring the misleading pauses that obscure the syntactic units of which this sentence consists. Reading aloud should be done by the teacher, not by students.

A third way of helping students learn to handle syntactically difficult sentences is occasionally to print such a sentence on the chalkboard with spacing which makes the sectors of the sentence clear. The above precept, for instance, is much easier to read when spaced as follows:

Do what you can
with what you have
where you are today.

Advertisers (who know more about reading than most teachers do) take pains to convey their messages clearly by means of such spacing. It is a pity that textbook publishers have so seldom followed the lead of business and industry in this respect.

Finally, and this takes us back to the first classroom activity recommended in these remarks, the teacher can help the class compose sentences characteristic of the language of public life. Having themselves gone through the operations involved in transforming a pair of kernel sentences into one with an imbedded clause, the class is better prepared to recognize such a sentence in printed material, better prepared to replace mentally the "fences" that mark off the various "nested" elements in spoken English but are absent from print.

Of course other questions could be asked about students with reading problems. Is the subject matter content appealing enough to make the effort of reading seem worthwhile? Have the students had the kinds of life experiences that enable them to grasp the meaning of what they read? That these are valid questions no one would deny,

yet they are less neglected than the questions I have been raising here. Since the Second Dialect student's everyday speech is farther removed than other dialects from the language of public life, one may ask whether his reading problems cannot best be solved by classroom activities that focus his attention on features that characterize the kind of English customarily presented to the public eye. It may also be useful to ask to what extent the student has grasped the relationship between speech and writing in English, has developed decoding skills that enable him to recognize known words when he sees them, has adjusted to the many instances of mismatch between sounds and spellings, has learned to compensate for the absence in print of aids to comprehension which are supplied by the voice in speech. Such questions, with answers in terms of classroom activities, deserve special attention when teachers help students read the language of public life.

Presented at the fourth annual TESOL Convention
San Francisco, California
March 18-21, 1970